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Pelikan's Antidisambiguation — "There and Back Again"

by Michael P. Pelikan (Penn State) <mppl10@psu.edu>

We'll use old Bilbo's title for reasons of brevity. Absent such constraints, I'd rather have used Gandalf's admonition, "There are older and fouler things than Orcs in the deep places of the world."

It being the Lenten season as this column is written, I crave your indulgence as I pause to reflect upon the fallen nature of the world: its inherent perversity, its brokenness, what my Slovak forebears called *zákön schválnosti*, or, "the general cussedness of things."

The examples are all around us, but for our present purposes, we'll confine our observations to those poignant spots where the realm of digital content and the realm of reason intersect. Bear with me; I've just read the column, and think this will get us somewhere....

The Blockbuster Video in town is closing. This strikes me not as a reflection on the quality of the content they offered (sad to say) but rather on a large-scale rejection of its format. Netflix seems to be doing quite well distributing much the same content, albeit in a format that doesn't require you even to get up out of your chair. The question of ownership of the digital "object" never even enters the picture. Indeed, we speak not of renting but of "streaming." It is a verb that rushes briefly past your home; it is never a noun that is borrowed.

Clearly this is the licensing model we need for eBooks. "Read at your own speed" could be the slogan, meaning you get to see a line or so at a time: a stream you can speed up or slow down to suit your preferences. How about rewind and instant replay? That's for version 2.0.

Speaking of reading, an acquaintance of mine recently got one of the new tablets (or "pads," I guess...). It wasn't an iPad, either version 1 or version 2, but it nevertheless had a visually stunning screen, promising a gratifying visual experience. I asked him if there was a Kindle app for it yet. "Yes," he replied, "but it's nothing spectacular." He opened the app and displayed for me a perfectly lovely screen of crisp text. "What do we want," I thought, "3-D?"

A timely thought, for this was the month that the much-anticipated Nintendo 3DS hit the market. At a price in the neighborhood of a really nice e-reader (or maybe just a run-of-the-mill model plus a whole bunch of digital editions), you can buy a game platform aimed squarely at your kids. But wait! What about the 3D content? Surely there's a wider audience for that! Do

you mean, beyond the dreary restatements of existing franchises? Well, yes, there could be, I suppose. The sublime maturity of the *Against the Grain* demographic chastens any amplification on my part in regard to specifying one of the largest segments of the entertainment industry to "embrace" 3D content at the present time. Let it suffice to say that it is the same segment that has successfully lobbied in favor of the creation of the ".xxx" domain. So either Nintendo has missed one of their most potentially lucrative audiences, or there's something they haven't told us yet. Is this a great country or what?

Once again we're faced with the age-old question, "How ya going to keep them down on the farm once they've seen Pairee?" Or, to bring it into the second decade of the twenty-first century, "How ya going to keep them on the printed page once they've seen Avatar?"

Many of us paid to see Avatar more than once. On the other hand, I've read *"The Mote in God's Eye"* at least five times, for the settings and for the story. In fact I bought a copy for my fifteen-year-old son recently. He disappeared completely and devoured it over a weekend, and I'll bet he'll go back again. Speaking of it later, he said he didn't think they'd ever make a movie out of Niven and Pournelle's classic, because if they did, "It would be really expensive, and, they'd get it wrong!" That's my boy.

So I vacillate between feeling stodgy, over-the-hill, and contented with that fact on the one hand, and feeling beset by a frighteningly vivid view of future trends and wondering how in the world we can get ahead of the curve on the other hand. In this, I'm thinking not of the technological transition from the printed word to e-ink, but rather of the entire way we pass on the World's collective intellectual and cultural heritage in an environment in which relevance is measured (or at least perceived) in six-month product lifecycles.

A freshman I know told me recently that her Sociology professor observed that she (the professor) was receiving papers that had obviously been written on cell phones, for they contained abbreviations straight out of the realm of texting. The professor told her class that this would not be acceptable. Another line drawn in the sand, I thought!

Not all cultural trends are so bleak. Back when we used to listen to music on transistor radios that were built by hand in the United States ("The Quality goes in before



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the Name goes on!"), a hit song was severely limited in length. I think it was Pete Townsend who observed that if you wrote a song longer than three minutes, "They kick you out of the union." Pete and his cohorts, of course, went on to write "Tommy," a rock opera filling up four sides of a double LP.

The point here is that the 45 rpm "Single" was perceived as the atomic unit of commercial music

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in the golden era of AM Radio and payola. A limitation of the medium served to facilitate a veritable goldmine for those with the vision to know how to wrest filthy lucre from the scenario.

Then along came the LP, and FM Radio — in stereo, no less, and with relatively high fidelity, and thus was born the commercial broadcasting genre known as “album rock.” Again, commercial success, at least, until the digital compact disk came along. Woah! Watch out! Where cassettes were grudgingly tolerated — the illicit copies were never of threateningly high quality anyway — now suddenly anyone with a CD drive could rip the content right off the disk: a perfect copy, too! The era of the MP3, and the end-user selected playlist, spelled the end of the Album. If the truth be told, it also ushered in (or may yet usher in) a renaissance of indie music, owned and distributed by the artists themselves. This is a Good Thing, right?

Well, let's ask the music publishers what they think.

But Omigosh! What if the same thing happened with authors?! And their publishers?!!

No worries. Big Business will survive. **Apple** will get their 30% cut. **Amazon** will fight for mind share. **Verizon** or **AT&T** will charge for the minutes. **Motorola**, **Samsung**, **LG**, and **Sony** will contend for those scraps of the hardware market not already spoken for by the Cult of Jobs. **Microsoft** will declare success and leave the marketplace to concentrate on their core business, whatever that turns out to be.

But wait. What does any of this really have to do with authors? Well, they'll still be around. Somebody will turn this week's hit into this month's franchise. Maybe somebody will do a screenplay. Once the feature film has run its course in the theatres, there's always the \$5-bin at **Wal-Mart**. See? Who says our culture is imperiled?

Of course, authors — even screenwriters — have to know how to write, right? So we'll still have higher education, and K-12, so presumably we'll still have textbooks. I mean, we can't do everything with wikis, can we?

And more importantly: somewhere, locked away in their rooms, will be the bloody-

minded non-joiners. These are the ones who will be banging away at their keyboards (be they computer or piano), working feverishly to capture the fleeting idea before it escapes them, or holding on for dear life as they're driven forward by it like a galleon under full sail. If they think about monetary rewards at all, it's merely to reflect upon how nice it is to be paid for something they would wish to do anyway. More often, in the throes of battle with the Muses, they don't care a fig for the bucks. They're just trying to get the idea down right.

These are the guys I've got my money on, as well as on the next generation of audience who will discover their works, recognize their genuineness, seek them out, and call for more.

So. Even though this column began as a declamation against the hyped, the derivative, and the over-commercialized, I've written my way back from the wasteland, coming home once again to a stubborn sense of confidence in the resilience, the utter irrepressibility, of the creative soul.

As **Yul Bryner** (or was it **Yogi Bera**?) said, “So let it be written. So let it be done.” 🐼

I Hear the Train A Comin' — Article Versioning: The Reality on the Ground



Column Editor: **Greg Tananbaum** (Founder and CEO, Anianet) <greg@anianet.com> www.anianet.com

“The reality on the ground” is a phrase I have lately appropriated to separate what is actually happening in our industry from the incredibly nuanced but often largely hypothetical discussions we observe on **Liblicense** or the **Scholarly Kitchen**. We are blessed to have any number of big thinkers in the scholarly communication space — **Joe Esposito**, **Toby Green**, and **ATG's** own **Sandy Thatcher** spring to mind — but we don't necessarily excel in reportage. This means we can debate the implications of Green vs. Gold OA, for example, using incredibly complex and well-reasoned arguments, but we are less successful when it comes to talking about what these theoretical mean in practical application. What is the reality on the ground? What is actually happening, as opposed to what *should* happen or what *might* happen?

When I learned that this issue of *Against the Grain* would be dedicated to the subject of journal article versioning, my first thought was “Who cares?” Now, to be clear, I wasn't asking myself why anyone would be interested in this subject. Rather, I truly wondered if this was an issue that mattered to publishers and librarians, but not to rank-and-file researchers. What is the reality on the ground for this population? We in the academic publishing world devote non-trivial energies to this subject, but should we? It seems to me that if scholars themselves don't particularly care about provenance or versions of record, then this is energy misspent.

With that in mind, I called up three researchers I know. One is a senior professor in the social sciences. The second is a mid-career professor in the humanities. The third is a mid-career professor in the physical sciences. They generously allowed me to pick their brains on the subject of journal article versioning. The results, of course, offer no statistical significance, but they do speak, at least anecdotally, to the reality on the ground.

My first question was blunt — Do you care whether the paper you read is the version of record or some other version? The responses ran the gamut, with the humanist expressing deep concern that any non-definitive version could include subtle errors or differences that might impact the substance of the article. The physical scientist prefers the version of record because it simplifies the citation process, but is happy to use non-definitive copies if he is simply reading a paper for informational purposes. The social scientist just wants to read a paper, and to ensure that anyone who wants to read it can have access to its substance. In that sense, the version of record is not important to him.

Given the era of tight library budgets, how would they feel if their institution were to cancel subscriptions to a journal because its contents could be acquired on the Web for free in non-authoritative form? The social scientist, consistent with his prior answer, would not care, provided he had the ability to cite the paper properly in his own writing (see next question). The physical

scientist indicates he would make due, though he might call upon colleagues at other institutions or the author him/herself to send the version of record on occasion. The humanist would be the most resistant to this change, promising to “raise a fuss like an old grandma at a buffet when they run out of the expensive stuff.” In his opinion, the lack of access to definitive content would be a significant disadvantage in his own research and writing. It would make the authoring process less efficient for him compared to his colleagues at other institutions. He fears that, in a publish-or-perish environment, such inefficiency could (not *would*, he is careful to note, but *could*) substantively damage his career prospects.

Digging a bit deeper, I next asked, “If you had access to a copy of a paper that was not definitive but was substantively the same as the published version (e.g., a postprint), would you use it for your own research or your teaching?” Here, all three professors responded similarly. They strive to use the definitive version of an article for outward-facing activities such as lectures, syllabi, and citations. They do so because they hope to ensure the author gets full and proper credit for his/her work. All three acknowledge that the current tenure and promotion system relies heavily on publishing high-impact articles. As such they do not want to undermine the professional prospects of an author whose work they admire by mis-citing

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